

DAILY REFLECTIONS FOR CREATIONTIDE



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He is a Diocesan Environmental Officer for Lichfield Diocese, on the Board of Directors for The John Ray Initiative, and most importantly he is dad to three wild boys!

RICHARD CLARKSON

NOTES

The season of Creationtide, also known as the Season Of Creation, has its origins in the Eastern Orthodox Church which in 1989 declared September 1st as a day of prayer for creation. Over the following decades, as awareness of the present ecological challenges facing our world grew, this single day of prayer developed into a liturgical season running from September 1st to October 4th, the feast day of St Francis of Assisi.

This season of Creationtide has been embraced by the leaders of the Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox churches, as well as by several major ecumenical groups including the World Council of Churches. During Creationtide Christians around the world are encouraged to pray for, and care for, God's good creation.

This book is written as a companion to the season of Creationtide, offering opportunities for reflection and response each day. It is not written with the purpose of convincing the reader that the world was indeed created by the God of the Bible. Instead it will look in a variety of ways at what it might mean to live within a created world, to help the reader to reflect on their place and role in the world that God has made, and to let that inform their faith. The daily reflections will draw on a wide range of writers and thinkers from across the Christian tradition, as well as from my own experience. Although the reflections are intended to be used during the five weeks of Creationtide, they could be used at any time during the year.

Each week will follow a broad theme, expressing it through reflection, experience, poetry and question, though of course there will be a natural overlap between the different weeks' themes. Week one will focus around God the Creator, reflecting on what that says about God and about the world. Week two will explore the place and role of humans within the created world. Week three will look at how creation praises the creator, and how it can inspire and shape our praise. Week four will ponder how we can prayerfully see and encounter the creator within the creation. Finally week five will take inspiration from women and men across the Christian tradition who have had a particular connection with creation.

NOTES

As an accompaniment to these reflections the book also begins with a suggested form of prayers which include within them space to use both the reflections. You may find it helpful to sit outdoors as you read the prayers and reflections. If this is not practical then I'd suggest sitting by a window, holding a stone or twig, or in some other way connecting yourself with the natural world while you read.

Much of the thinking behind these reflections was worked out in two places. Firstly it was developed on a theoretical level through writing my masters thesis on Nature Contemplation at The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education which formed part of my curacy training in the Diocese of Lichfield. This research, which centred around the writings of Maximus the Confessor, was formative in giving a solid theological grounding to my thoughts about the place of nature contemplation as a Christian spiritual discipline. I am extremely grateful to the Diocese for the opportunity to study at this level. This theoretical understanding was worked out on a practical level through the Mossy Church group which we ran on a local nature reserve in the parishes where I was a curate.

My thanks are due to the five churches of the AMICA Benefice in a beautiful corner of North Shropshire where I am Rector, and who have allowed me time to work on these reflections. Thanks also to the John Ray Initiative, and Martin Hodson in particular, for agreeing to publish these reflections during Creationtide 2018. Above all thanks to my wife, Lucie, and our boys—Charlie, Toby, and Luca—for their encouragement, support, patience and love as I have shut myself away in my study late into the night writing.

This book is my attempt to offer some of my learning and experience to diocese and the wider church and hopefully to help others to use the season of Creationtide in such a way that both heart, mind, body and soul are stimulated to love the creation, and the creator, more deeply.

*Rev'd Rich Clarkson
Moreton Say, August 13th 2018
The feast day of St Maximus the Confessor*

BIBLE READINGS

Genesis	1:1	Week One, Day One
	1:3	Week One, Day Three
	1:24	Week Three, Day Five
	1:36	Week Two, Day One
	1:31	Week One, Day Seven
	2:15	Week Two, Day Three
	28:16-18	Week Four, Day Six
Exodus	3:2	Week Four, Day Two
1 Samuel	3:10	Week Four, Day Four
Job	12:7	Week Four, Day Seven
	25:2	Week Five, Day Five
	40:15	Week Two, Day Two
Psalm	8:6	Week Two, Day Four
	19:1	Week Three, Day One
	24:1	Week One, Day Five
	33:6	Week One, Day Two
	111:2	Week Five, Day Three
	121:5	Week Four, Day Three
	147:1,4	Week Two, Day Seven
	148;3,7	Week Three, Day Seven
Isaiah	42:5	Week One, Day Six
	44:23	Week Three, Day Three
	55:12	Week Three, Day Four
Ezekiel	17:24	Week Four, Day Five
Matthew	4:18	Week Five, Day Two
	10:29	Week Three, Day Six
	14:23	Week Four, Day One
	25:40	Week Five, Day One
Luke	10:27	Week Five, Day Six
	19:40	Week Three, Day Two
John	1:1,14	Week Five, Day Seven
Romans	8:19	Week Two, Day Five
Colossians	1:16	Week One, Day Four
	1:17	Week Five, Day Four
1 Timothy	4:4-5	Week Two, Day Six

DAILY PRAYERS

DAILY PRAYERS

In the name of God the Father

All: Who made Heaven and earth

In the name of God the Son

All: Who became a creature like us

In the name of God the Holy Spirit

All: Who sustains all life on earth

In the name of God

All: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The day's reflection is read, followed by a time of silence

In the world around us, this day we pray

All: Your kingdom come

In the world before us, this day we pray

All: Your kingdom come

In the world beside us, this day we pray

All: Your kingdom come

In the world within us, this day we pray

All: Your kingdom come

The Lord's Prayer may be said

Silence is kept

God of wonder, go with us into this new day

Speak to us, refresh us, astound us,

that we may grow to love you,

and your world, more deeply.

All: Amen.

WEEK FOUR, DAY ONE

B. Stanley 'Forest Church', *Mystic Christ Press 2013*

WEEK FOUR, DAY TWO

N. Constatas 'The Ambigua', *Harvard University Press 2014*

E.B. Browning 'The Collected Poems', *Wordsworth Editions Ltd 2015*

WEEK FOUR, DAY THREE

T. Merton 'Introduction to Christian Mysticism', *Cistercian Publications 2008*

WEEK FOUR, DAY FOUR

Abbot Parry OSB 'The Rule of St Benedict', *Gracewing 1990*

R. J. Berry 'Ecology and the Environment', *Templeton Press 2011*

P. M. Blowers 'Drama of the Divine Economy', *OUP 2012*

WEEK FOUR, DAY FIVE

T. Merton 'When the Trees Say Nothing', *Sorin Books 2003*

P. Wohlleben 'The Hidden Life of Trees', *William Collins 2017*

WEEK FOUR, DAY SIX

J. Inge 'A Christian Theology of Place', *Ashgate Publishing 2003*

WEEK FIVE, DAY TWO

Bede 'The Ecclesiastical History of the English People', *OUP 2008*

R. MacFarlane 'The Old Ways', *Penguin 2013*

WEEK FIVE, DAY THREE

https://www.jri.org.uk/resource/ray_natural_historian.htm

WEEK FIVE, DAY FOUR

Hildegard of Bingen 'The Book of Divine Works', *Catholic University of America Press 2018*

WEEK FIVE, DAY FIVE

J. Gribbin 'Science: A History', *Penguin Books 2003*

WEEK FIVE, DAY SIX

L. White Jr. 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science 1967*

Armstrong, Hellmann & Short (Eds) 'Francis of Assisi: The Founder', *New City Press 2000*

Pope Francis 'Laudato Si', *Catholic Truth Society 2015*

WEEK FIVE, DAY SEVEN

N. Constatas 'The Ambigua', *Harvard University Press 2014*

G.M. Hopkins 'The Major Works', *OUP 2009*

G. Kendrick 'Meekness and Majesty', *Thankyou Music 1986*

REFERENCES

INTRODUCTION

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WEEK ONE, DAY ONE

M. Jones 'Basil of Caesarea', *Christian Focus Publications 2014*

WEEK ONE, DAY THREE

J.P. Newell 'The Book of Creation', *Canterbury Press Norwich 1999*

WEEK ONE, DAY FOUR

L. Thunberg 'Microcosm and Mediator', *Open Court Publishing 1995*

WEEK ONE, DAY FIVE

Monty Python 'Monty Python Sings', *EMI 1989*

WEEK ONE, DAY SIX

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/aug/15/all-hail-the-humble-moss-bringer-of-oxygen-and-life-to-earth>

WEEK ONE, DAY SEVEN

N. Wirzba 'From Nature to Creation', *Baker Academic 2015*

WEEK TWO, DAY TWO

R. Bauckham 'Bible and Ecology', *Darton, Longman & Todd 2010*

WEEK TWO, DAY THREE

G.M. Hopkins 'The Major Works', *OUP 2009*

WEEK TWO, DAY FOUR

R.J. Berry 'Environmental Attitudes Through Time' *CUP 2018*

WEEK TWO, DAY FIVE

Habel, Rhoads & Santmire 'The Season of Creation', *Fortress Press 2011*

WEEK TWO, DAY SIX

E. Theokritoff 'Creation and Priesthood in Modern Orthodox Thinking',
Ecotheology 10.3 2005

G. Tomlin 'The Widening Circle', *SPCK 2014*

WEEK THREE, DAY TWO

A. McIntosh 'Soil and Soul', *Aurum Press 2001*

WEEK THREE, DAY THREE

G. Usher 'Places of Enchantment', *SPCK 2012*

WEEK THREE, DAY FIVE

G.M. Hopkins 'The Major Works', *OUP 2009*

WEEK THREE, DAY SIX

M. Oliver 'Devotions', *Penguin Press 2017*

WEEK THREE, DAY SEVEN

R. D. Sorrell 'St Francis of Assisi and Nature', *OUP 1988*

J. Schaeffer 'Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics',
Georgetown University Press 2009

WEEK FIVE, DAY SEVEN

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and lived among us.*

John 1:1,14

As we come to the end of this season there is one figure who has been present across all our reflections, whose life and being has inspired all who we have met on our journey, and that is Jesus himself.

John begins his gospel with that beautiful reflection on the Word made flesh, or as Maximus the Confessor put it— *'the word becomes thick'*. The one who spoke all life into being breathes our air and walks our lanes and cries our tears, creator become creature, word become thick.

In doing so, as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it in his poem *That Nature Is A Heraclitean Fire*, *'I am all at once what Christ is, / since he was what I am'*, or to quote Graham Kendrick's *Meekness and Majesty*, Christ *'lifts our humanity to the heights of his throne'*.

But both of those quotes, powerful as they are, fall shy of the fullness of what Christ has done which concerns far more than just human life. The cosmic scope is perhaps best expressed in Paul's letter to the Colossians where he wrote that through Jesus, *'God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.'*

In Christ *all things* are brought to the heights of his throne, every chaffinch and every child, every adult and every adder, every person and every pine and every part of every planet is reconciled to God and filled with new hope because the Word became flesh and lived among us.

*Take some time today to reflect back on this season of Creationtide.
How has it helped you follow Jesus more closely as you walk in his world?*

DAILY REFLECTIONS

WEEK ONE:

CREATOR

WEEK ONE, DAY ONE

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Genesis 1:1

The famous opening words of the Bible, the Old Testament, the Torah, set the scene for all that is to come: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. All that was, all that is, all that will be, all this comes from God. Right from the off the Bible speaks of a God who is not passive or distant, but active and involved. The opening chapter goes on to describe the scale, the diversity, the goodness of God's creation, but here it is enough to simply reflect on the one who creates.

Basil of Caesarea—the first of many such figures we shall meet over the coming weeks—was a Bishop in the fourth century in what is now Turkey. In one of his sermons he compared God the creator to a potter who, after painstakingly crafting a series of beautiful pots, *'has not exhausted either his art or his talent'*. The creation of the world was not a one time burst of energy that left God exhausted, rather it was a pouring out of something deep within God—a desire to create, to bring about beauty and order and all that is good. God created because God is creative and God's creativity does not run dry.

This creative heart has left its fingerprints throughout the creation: in the wild evolution of nature, in the instinctive desire of our earliest ancestors to make art on the walls of their caves, in the stories that we tell to our children. The world is filled with creativity because it was created by a creative God whose art and talent are inexhaustible. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth—and that was only the beginning!

*What signs of God's creativity can you see around you,
or within you today?*

WEEK FIVE, DAY SIX

Jesus answered, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind', and 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

Luke 10:27

In 1967 the historian Lynn White Jr. wrote an influential paper in the journal 'Science' in which he argued that Christianity's overly anthropocentric outlook is the cause of many of the environmental problems the world is now facing. In this highly critical article White reserved his sole praise for Francis of Assisi, who he described as *'the greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history'* for his re-imagining of the relationship between humanity and nature.

Francis's humble relationship with his fellow creatures has inspired many people over the centuries, not least the men and women who have followed in the Franciscan Orders. One of his earliest biographers, Bonaventure, writing just a few decades after Francis' death, wrote *'With an intensity of unheard devotion, he savored in each and every creature that Goodness and ...he sweetly encouraged them to praise the Lord'*

In his 'Laudato Si', Pope Francis, who took St Francis as his name and inspiration, called him *'the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically.'*

Through his writing and more importantly through his example, Francis reminds us that Jesus' command to love our neighbour as ourself holds true for the whole of God's creation, human and non-human. But he also reminds us that that love should be lived out with joy and devotion.

*How will the example of St Francis inspire you today?
Let your heart be filled with joy as you go through the day.*

WEEK FIVE, DAY FIVE

*Domion and awe belong to God
He establishes order in the heights of heaven*

Job 25:2

Johannes Kepler was an astronomer who lived in Germany in the seventeenth century. This was a time of great religious and political upheaval and Kepler's life was touched by both. In his early years he wanted to be a theologian and poured his not inconsiderable talents into this pursuit. However, at the completion of his studies he was persuaded that, rather than become a minister, he should take up a post as a professor of mathematics.

Kepler continued his astronomical research, working particularly with the great Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, bringing mathematical rigour to a discipline which until then was little different to astrology. As he discovered more of the beauty and elegance of planetary motion Kepler became convinced that it was a reflection of its creator, writing in 1599 to the Bavarian Chancellor that *'God wanted us to recognise [the laws of nature] by creating us after his own image so that we could share in his own thoughts'*.

Kepler's faith in a God of order led him, and us, to a deeper understanding of both God and creation. Just as we can learn something about a composer from the music they write, or a sculptor from the statues they create, or a chef from the food they cook, so we can learn about God from the universe that he has made.

*What can you learn about God by paying attention
to the world around you today?*

WEEK ONE, DAY TWO

*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
their starry host by the breath of his mouth.*

Psalm 33:6

The protesters were getting agitated by this point. They were frustrated by the impassive faces before them and wanted to see something, some acknowledgement of their pain, some understanding of their plight, but they were met with blank stares. It's unclear who threw the first bottle but it certainly got a response and soon a second, and then a third bottle flew through the air. Just as it looked like the situation was about to unravel, a voice pierced the air. An elderly woman near the front of the crowd was singing with a power that belied her slight stature. *'We shall live in peace,'* she sang, *'we shall overcome'*. Her voice carried far across the square, prompting others to join in, and her words of peace restored peace to that volatile gathering.

In the right circumstances, with the right authority, a breath can be a powerful thing. It can calm a troubled crowd, summon a sleeping parent, convey the deepest grief, give a world-changing order, restore a loved one to life. A breath can be a powerful thing.

In the Bible the breath of God is rightly spoken of with the utmost respect. It is the breath of God which creates the starry host (Ps 33:6), gives life to Adam (Gen 2:7), brings forth ice (Job 37:10) and fire (Job 41:21), and fills the disciples with the Holy Spirit (Jn 20:22). The breath of God is a powerful, creative force. God didn't need tools to create the universe, God simply spoke—or perhaps, as C.S. Lewis so memorably described in *The Magician's Nephew*, sang—the world into being. By the breath of God's mouth, creation began.

*Pay attention to the creative power of your breath today,
let this remind you of the breath of God.*

WEEK ONE, DAY THREE

Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.

Genesis 1:3

The early Celtic Christians knew the significance of that first command, *'let there be light'*. J. Philip Newell, in his introduction to Celtic Spirituality, explains that for the Celts there was a distinct difference between the light of the first day of creation, and the light of the fourth day of creation. The light of the fourth day—the sun, moon and stars—is a visible light. The light of the first day, however, is the light of being, from which *'inaccessible light of God all life comes forth'*. Without this light, nothing could exist. This echoes the opening of John's gospel, *'In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.'*

Thinking about light in this way can help us to think about God. If you shine a torch across a dark room you cannot see the beam unless it has something to reflect off—a speck of dust perhaps, or a far wall. The light reveals and illuminates all that it sees, yet it is still somehow mysterious. That same sense of mystery and wonder is felt when watching the sun set. However much we may understand the physics of atmospheric diffraction and spectral dispersion, to see the sky slowly light up in a magnificent colour display is guaranteed to invoke a profound feeling of awe.

For the Celts, light was not a symbol of release from what would otherwise be dark, rather, as Newell puts it, *'redemption is about light being liberated from the heart of creation and from the essence of who we are.'* With those first words of creation God filled the whole creation with the light of life, and that same light illuminates all life to this day.

Try to notice the light around you as you go about your day today.

Let it draw you into the presence of the God of light.

WEEK FIVE, DAY FOUR

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:17

Hildegard of Bingen was an extraordinary woman. Living in 12th century Germany she rose to prominence as a visionary, artist, composer, preacher, and Benedictine Abbess. She was given papal authority to write books, and to preach to both clergy and laity alike—unheard of for a woman at the time.

At the heart of Hildegard's spirituality were visions which she had from a very young age. She came to see these visions, painful as they were to experience, as messages from God and so she spent much of her life painting, describing and explaining them.

Through these visions she came to understand the deep connectedness between God and creation, writing in her Book of Divine Works that *'everything that God made is life in him, for that which is from God is alive in its nature'*

She also understood the place of humanity within that divine life, saying that *'as one fire kindles and brings forth another, so humankind exists in relation to the rest of creation'*. Hildegard was well aware of the brokenness of that relationship however, and living in a time of political turmoil was not afraid to speak out against injustice.

Some nine centuries later Hildegard's visions and her music continue to remind us that that our world, with all its fractures and divisions, is held together in Jesus Christ, and longs to be restored.

Take time to notice the inter-connectedness of things today.

Can you find ways of restoring what has been broken?

WEEK FIVE, DAY THREE

Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.

Psalm 111:2

John Ray was the son of a blacksmith and was born on the smithy floor in a little village in Essex in 1627. From these humble origins he rose to become one of the most eminent scientists of his day, a fellow of Trinity College Cambridge alongside Isaac Newton, and an early member of the Royal Society. Ray studied the natural world with great care and precision, and this careful study was a response to his Christian faith.

Charles Raven, in his 1942 biography of John Ray, wrote that for Ray, *'loyalty to truth was loyalty to God...he found in the physical world the awe and reverence, the release and inspiration which psalmists, poets, thinkers and explorers have always found'*.

This balance between scientific study and theological reflection reached its peak in his 1691 book, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation*. In this book Ray argued against the idea that the natural world was *'created for man...as if there were no other end of any creature but some way or other to be serviceable to Man'*, going on to write that *'wise men now think otherwise'*.

John Ray's faith led him to see the inherent value in the world around him, not simply its usefulness to humans. Just like the writer of Psalm 111, Ray delighted in the works of the Lord, and so studied them carefully in order to understand the wisdom of God.

*Are there parts of God's creation you find inspiring?
Try learning something new about them today.*

WEEK ONE, DAY FOUR

In him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible... all things have been created through him and for him.

Colossians 1:16

Maximus the Confessor—another figure who will return as we journey through this season together—was, as a young man in the early seventh century, rising fast through the ranks of Constantinople's high society. However he renounced this life to become a monk, first in what is now Turkey, and later in North Africa where he became a prolific writer.

Maximus wrote about how the universe was created out of nothing by God. And if the universe was created out of nothing by God, he said, then everything that exists somehow comes from God. And if everything that exists somehow comes from God then everything contains some imprint, some essence, of the creator's intention within it.

This means that the amazing diversity of creation tells us something profound about the power and imagination of the creator. It also means that as we pay attention to the world around us we can begin to see God's fingerprints in all that has been made.

A constantly flowing stream reminds us of God's unfailing mercy. The rugged bark of an exposed tree speaks of God's protection. A mother bird sheltering and providing for her chicks is an image of God's care. A night sky full of stars reveals the overwhelming magnitude of God. On their own each of these only says a little about God, but together they build up a picture of the creator.

What signs of God's fingerprints can you see around you today?

WEEK ONE, DAY FIVE

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.

Psalm 24:1

One of the most commonly requested hymns at weddings and funerals is 'All things Bright and Beautiful'. Most clergy and organists I know have to suppress an inner sigh when they hear this old favourite suggested. For those who are involved in these services regularly it may feel overused, however I think the reason it is so popular is because it does resonate with people's understanding of God, and the world.

*All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small,
all things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all.*

It's a profoundly simple encapsulation of the essence of biblical creation theology—God made it all. Of course the hymn only focusses on the bright and the beautiful, so we must thank Monty Python for suggesting some additional verses to balance it out:

*All things dull and ugly, All creatures short and squat,
All things rude and nasty, The Lord God made the lot.*

It's easy to think of God as the creator of a beautiful flower, a starlit night, or a crashing waterfall, but God is the creator of *all* creation—the good, the bad and the ugly. In the coming weeks we will look at some of the ways in which the beauty and integrity of creation has been damaged by human action. Our starting point, however, must be that all life is good, be it meerkat or mosquito, wisteria or wasp, bluebell or bindweed. All life has value because all life comes from God. Bright and beautiful or dull and ugly—the Lord God made them all.

*Notice the 'dull and ugly' parts of God's creation today—
can you find beauty in them?*

WEEK FIVE, DAY TWO

*As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers,
Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew.*

Matthew 4:18

St Chad of Mercia, the first Bishop of Lichfield, was one of four brothers sent to live and study at the monastery of Lindesfarne in the seventh century, all of whom became priests in the Anglo-Saxon Church. The collect prayer for St Chad commends his '*peaceable nature, humble spirit and prayerful life*' and it was these characteristics which marked his ministry which took place during a time of great turbulence in the English Church.

Though as Bishop of Lichfield his diocese covered most of the Midlands, Chad would travel on foot rather than by horse, preferring the closer connection this gave him with both creation and the people of his diocese. In the Venerable Bede's account, when Archbishop Theodore heard of this, '*the archbishop lifted him onto the horse with his own hands...and he determined to compel him to ride a horse when necessity arose*'.

Though, as David Adam notes, Chad acknowledged the sense of Theodore's suggestion, he would no doubt have missed the slower pace of travel through the landscape which walking afforded him. The nature writer Robert MacFarlane writes of the significance of walking in his book *The Old Ways*. '*For pilgrims walking*' MacFarlane says, '*every footfall is doubled, landing at once on the actual road and also on the path of faith*'. Whether it is flashing by through a car window or pressing up close against the soles of our feet, how we travel through the world shapes how we see it.

*How will you travel through the world today?
Try to slow down and notice the places through which you pass.*

The king will reply, 'truly I tell you, whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me

Matthew 25:40

St Melangell grew up as the daughter of an Irish king in the sixth century but fled from an arranged marriage and sought refuge in the forests of mid-Wales. There she settled into a life of prayer and isolation, developing a deep relationship with her fellow creatures who shared the woods.

One day Melangell was praying in a forest glade when a hare ran to her and buried itself in her cloak, swiftly followed by Prince Brochwel and his hounds. The prince was shocked to see this woman in his forest and demanded that she release the creature to his hounds or he'd set them on her instead.

However Melangell stood her ground and the dogs refused to approach her despite the commands of their masters. Amazed by her faith and courage Brochwel gifted her a parcel of land in the forest to establish an abbey as a sanctuary for all who would seek refuge there. A church still stands on the spot near the village of Pennant Melangell and pilgrims still travel there

Melangell's faith inspired her to stand up for her fellow creatures, regardless of the impact it could have had on her own life. In doing so she was part of a rich heritage of people of faith standing up to power on behalf of the vulnerable. A heritage which stretches right back to the Old Testament prophets, and is exemplified in Jesus standing up for the woman who was about to be stoned.

How might Melangell's example inspire you stand up to power in defence of vulnerable creatures today?

The Creator of the heavens...who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it.

Isaiah 42:5

Around 400 million years ago life on earth was concentrated almost entirely in the oceans as the atmosphere was unbreathable. Scientist have recently shown that the organism responsible for filling this toxic environment with clean, freshly oxygenated air was, as the Guardian Newspaper put it, the '*humble moss*'. Without the carpet of moss that gradually covered the continents and oxygenated the atmosphere, life would have remained in the ocean and nothing that we know would have been possible.

This is a beautiful example of what has often been described as God '*making the world to make itself*'. The creative power with which God has filled creation means that it is constantly changing and developing, enabling life to flourish where none seemed possible.

Praise God for humble moss, without whom we,
Who live and breathe and leap and laugh and praise,
Could no more do such things. Praise God for days
Long past when mosses spread from sea to sea
A continental carpet breathing fresh
New life into the oxygen starved air.
Praise God for lungs which found that they could bear
To breathe this atmosphere. Praise God for flesh
Which crept and crawled and leapt and breathed and moved
Among the lichens, liverworts and ferns.
Praise God for life's tenacity across
The ages as it gradually improved,
Evolved, developed hopes, dreams and concerns.
For all of this, praise God for humble moss.

Rich Clarkson, 2017

What signs of life flourishing in unlikely ways can you see today?

WEEK ONE, DAY SEVEN

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

Genesis 1:31

We have lots of art on the walls of our house, some of which we bought, some we were given, and some we made ourselves. I am no artist myself—I prefer to be creative with words or music or food—but I love having it around. My favourite pieces of art are the ones that have a story, like the brightly coloured canvas in the lounge which my wife painted, and on which if you look closely you can make out a toddler’s footprint from where one of the boys walked across it. Or the harbour scene above the sofa which we bought in memory of a relative. Or the owl’s eye in the play room which our oldest son painted for his homework and which won a prize in the local village show. These are more than simply pretty pictures, they tell a story, they are part of our family history and so we treasure them.

Norman Wirzba, in his book “From Nature to Creation”, tells us that *‘The way we name and narrate the world determines how we are going to live within it’*. He goes on to say that by naming the world as Creation, and particularly as *good* Creation, we are not only defining what the world is, but also how we live within it—we are making it part of our story, or perhaps it’s better to say that we are making ourselves part of *its* story.

To call the world ‘good’ means that we value it, cherish it, care for it. To call the world ‘creation’ means that we respect it, treasure it, look after it. The earth is not simply a resource with which we can do as we please, it is a work of art created by a master craftsman, it is a good creation and we have the blessing of sharing in it.

Try consciously naming the world as God’s good creation today.

How does that change your attitude towards it?

DAILY REFLECTIONS

WEEK FIVE:

INSPIRATION

WEEK FOUR, DAY SEVEN

Ask the animals, and they will teach you

Job 12:7

I saw a fox last week. It sauntered past
The window where I sat and ate and watched -
Eyes bright, tail swinging low, a casual air
Belied the steady purpose in each stride.
Was she (or he) off hunting? Or perhaps
He (or she) was seeking out new ground,
New territory, a place to call his own
In this post-adolescent world. I do
Not know. The fox passed by and then was gone
A mere momentary glimpse, which lingered long
Impressing into memory, fleshed out
By stories half remembered, myths once heard
Not of this actual fox but of its kind.
I could not see the fox before my eyes,
Without the echo of its reputation.
Yet this fox, in this garden, on this day
May not have been at all like foxes past.
How true that fox and human both alike
Are carried by a weight of expectation
The burden of our past, our name, our kind,
Can cloud the way we see, the way we're seen
Until we, fox and human both alike,
Lose that which makes me me, and makes you you.
Yet I am I and you are you and fox,
Dear fox who travelled through my gaze that day,
Is fox. And we are none of us the same.

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DAILY REFLECTIONS

WEEK TWO:

HUMANITY

*What can you learn about yourself, about the world, about God
by observing creation today?*

WEEK TWO, DAY ONE

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over everything upon the earth.'

Genesis 1:26

There was once a king who ruled over vast empire. Try as he might he was unable to keep track of all that was going on in his kingdom and so he appointed a group of governors to oversee different regions and report back to him. He gave them each a ring bearing his royal seal so that they could make decisions and act with his authority. Before they left for their new posts he impressed upon them the importance of their role in ensuring that the people of his kingdom were kept safe and well.

After some time the king decided to travel around his empire and see how his officials were getting on. On arriving in the first region he was delighted to see the land and its people thriving, and everyone he met spoke highly of the governor who clearly cared for all who lived there.

However, upon reaching the next region the king was shocked to see a beautifully opulent governor's mansion, surrounded by barren fields and a poor, ill-treated population. The people he met spoke of the governor's desire to live like a king himself, and how he had used the ring which the king had given him as proof of his entitlement to do what he wished with the people in his care.

The king immediately sent for the governor and demanded that he return the ring. He then put the first governor in charge of this region as well as he had shown that he could use his authority wisely to care for the land and its people in accordance with the desires of the king.

How might you act as God's representative in the world today?

WEEK FOUR, DAY SIX

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place' and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar

Genesis 28:16,18

People have always had an instinctive understanding that certain places are special, sacred even, and these places have long been named and marked by stones or trails or stories. They may be places of encounter, places of rescue, places of rest, places of beauty.

Some places are only special for individuals, such as the tree root by a little bend in a stream in mid-Wales where I sat with my feet in the water and prayed during a particularly difficult time. Others, such as Holy Island or the Callanish Stones on the Isle of Lewis, have a sacred life far beyond those original encounters. These are often called *Thin Places*, places where Heaven and Earth seem closer together.

John Inge, in his book *A Christian Theology of Place*, argues that these Thin Places become so because of *'Divine disclosure that has happened there in its Christian past, as opposed to any intrinsic holiness'*. As an individual or a community encounter God in a particular place—like Jacob in Bethel, or Columba and his companions on Iona—that becomes a sacred place for them. Then others come to that place with an expectation of encountering God and so they are more open to that encounter and so that becomes known as a Thin Place.

This means that the boundary between Heaven and Earth is never as far as we might think, any place can be a sacred place if we only allow ourselves to encounter God there.

Where are your 'sacred places'?

How will you allow yourself to encounter God today?

WEEK FOUR, DAY FIVE

All the trees of the forest will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall.

Ezekiel 17:24

There is a large Oak tree which presides over our garden. They say that a single Oak sustains a thousand species – I haven't counted, but I know that she provides a safe space for squirrels and crows, ivy and ferns, tawny owls, children and countless insects. That old oak no doubt grew from one of thousands upon thousands of acorns to fall onto the soil and she is now flourishing in her vocation. I often ponder that tree when I'm praying in the garden. Her boughs overhang the churchyard, the tennis court, and the Rectory garden. What joys and sorrows, what love and grief have been shared under her shade?

Thomas Merton, the great nature contemplative, wrote that "A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying him." From the Garden of Eden onwards, trees have always held a place of special significance for humans. From the patience of the Ash tree in Spring, to the joyfulness of a Horse Chestnut in Autumn, to the wise shelter of our old Oak tree, they teach us about ourselves.

Peter Wohlleben, in his book *The Hidden Life Of Trees*, explores the hugely complex networks of relationships found within forests and woods. He concludes that '*we shouldn't be concerned about trees purely for material reasons, we should also care about them because of the...wonders they present us with. Under the canopy of the trees, daily dramas and moving love stories are played out.*'

*Spend some time under a tree today.
What stories do you notice playing out there?*

WEEK TWO, DAY TWO

Look at the Behemoth, which I made just as I made you

Job 40:15

If being made in the image of God somehow sets humans apart from the rest of creation, the Bible balances this by making it clear that we too are created by God, just like our fellow creatures. Sometimes this is expressed in beautiful poetry such as in Psalm 139:

*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.*

However I do rather like God's somewhat more grumpy response to Job, after the long debate between Job and his friends over the cause of Job's misfortune. Where Job's life has been devastated by forces of chaos—wind, fire, violence—God takes issue with Job's self-righteousness by putting him on a level with a creature which epitomises those forces of chaos, the behemoth (quite possibly a hippopotamus, though built up in the fearful imagination of nomadic communities). It is a reminder to Job, and to us, that we are in no way in control, or in charge, of nature.

Richard Bauckham writes about the need to rediscover '*the community of creation*', so that as humans we might re-find our place alongside, rather than separate from, our fellow creatures. Indeed I sometimes think that Charles Darwin's great gift to the Church (though it's not always been acknowledged) is the reminder that we are animals too, creatures within creation. We would all do well to heed God's instruction to Job to '*Look at the Behemoth, which I made just as I made you*'.

*How do you feel about being a 'creature within creation'?
Notice how this affects your view of other creatures today.*

WEEK TWO, DAY THREE

*The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden
to till it and keep it*

Genesis 2:15

I am not a gardener, I'd like to make that very clear. As much as I enjoy being in the garden, and even doing jobs in the garden, I don't have the depth of understanding of light and shade, height and colour, soil acidity and drainage, not to mention Latin names and all the other things you need to know about in order to tend a garden well. As much as I might wish it to be otherwise, I'm not a gardener.

One of the first job descriptions given to humans in the Bible is to 'till and keep' the garden of Eden. Now as we know Adam and Eve didn't do a brilliant job, eating the forbidden fruit in the first act of environmental destruction. Ever since then, humans have struggled to live up to the task of caring for, rather than abusing, the natural world. The Victorian poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins once watched a stand of trees being cut down and recorded the incident in his poem 'Binsey Poplars', saying of nature: *'Even where we mean to mend her we end her'*.

As global resources become more and more stretched, as the disconnect between eating and food production increases, as children—and adults—spend less and less time outdoors, we have somehow lost that original calling to 'till and keep' the garden, to be good stewards of the land in which we are placed.

And yet now, perhaps more than ever, the land needs us to be good stewards. The land needs us to care for it, to stand up for it, to respect it. This is not a task for just a few dedicated individuals, it's the original vocation of all people on earth. So perhaps I am a gardener after all.

Can you make time to care for some small part of God's creation today?

WEEK FOUR, DAY FOUR

*The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel!
Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."*

1 Samuel 3:10

The practice of Lectio Divina, divine reading, of scripture has ancient roots. From the early centuries of the Church onwards Christians have read the Bible with the expectation that the Holy Spirit will speak through it. The practice of Lectio Divina began to be formalised in sixth century Benedictine monasteries when St Benedict wrote in his rule that *'brothers should be occupied at certain times in manual labour, and at other times in prayerful reading [lectio divina]'*. Later contemplatives and writers such as St John of the Cross and John Calvin encouraged the use of this practice to read the book of scripture.

The ecologist Sam Berry writes in his book Ecology and Environment about *'God's two books'*, the book of words (the Bible), and the book of works (creation). He quotes Martin Luther who said that *'God writes the gospel not in the Bible alone but on trees and flowers and clouds and stars'*. These two books are written in very different languages and neither can be read without the other if we are to truly know the author.

Can the practice of lectio Divina, which has long been used for reading the book of words, be used to help us read the book of works too? If we approach God's good creation with the expectation that the Holy Spirit will speak through it then we may be surprised by what we hear. It's worth remembering, though, that the two books should be read together so that we are, as Paul Blowers puts it, *'reading creation through the lens of scripture'*

*Have you used Lectio Divina before?
Try using this practice on God's creation today.*

WEEK FOUR, DAY THREE

*The Lord watches over you
the Lord is your shade at your right hand*

Psalm 121:5

It seems far too nice to stay indoors so I decide to say Morning Prayer outside. The blackbirds scatter as I head out, shaking their heads in indignation at my entering *their* garden. Although it is not yet ten o'clock there is heat in the midsummer sun and so I drag the bench over towards one of the tall Ash trees which grace the garden's edge. As I pray the blackbirds decide that I come in peace after all and they get back to their thankless task of gathering an endless supply of insects for their insatiable chicks.

My spoken prayers concluded, I sit in silence for a while, pondering those words from Psalm 121 which I've just read. I look over my right shoulder at the Ash tree in whose shade I sit and am filled with gratitude. The mother blackbird feeding her chicks, the Ash tree giving shade and shelter, both offer a beautiful glimpse of God's care and protection.

Thomas Merton was a trappist monk who lived in America in the mid twentieth century, and he wrote extensively about what the Greek Fathers called *Theoria Physike*, or Nature Contemplation. Merton describes this as '*The intuition of divine things in and through the reflection of God in nature.*'

My spiritual companions that morning, the Ash tree and the blackbirds, offered to me the gift of a reflection of God. Through prayer and contemplation I was able to perceive those 'divine things', and so received the gift of seeing both God and the scripture in a new light.

What divine things can you see reflected in the world around you today?

WEEK TWO, DAY FOUR

*You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet.*

Psalm 8:6

"It's mine."

"No, it's mine!"

"No it's not, it's MINE!!"

And so it goes on until the toy gets fed up with being pulled in two directions and breaks. Anyone who has spent much time with children will be familiar with this particular conversation. We learn about ownership from a very young age, and the tension between owning and sharing—whether that's an object, an idea, or a place—never really goes away.

The question of who owns the natural world came into particular focus at the beginning of the modern era, as technological and intellectual advances made such questions acutely relevant. In his book 'Environmental Attitudes Through Time', Sam Berry quotes John Locke, the seventeenth century philosopher, who said, '*Though the water running in the fountain be every one's, yet who can doubt, but that in the pitcher is his only who drew it out?*'

Verses such as Psalm 8, and the charge to "have dominion" in Genesis 1, suddenly became very popular with those who saw the natural world as a resource to be owned and used, rather than a gift to be cherished. But are we, as René Descartes put it, '*Lords and possessors of nature?*' Or has all our pushing and pulling and squabbling over ownership actually ended up breaking this precious gift?

*What signs of brokenness can you see in God's creation today?
How might you begin to heal them?*

WEEK TWO, DAY FIVE

*The creation waits with eager longing
for the revealing of the children of God*

Romans 8:19

I can't remember where I came across the interview but the quote has often come to my mind over the years since I heard it. It was from a conversation with a National Park Ranger who was talking about the challenges of looking after some of the most beautiful and wild places in the country, especially when some of them receive millions of visitors each year. After sharing something of the great variety of tasks involved in her role she said this: *'it takes an awful lot of effort to keep these places looking untouched by human hands'*

Recent studies have shown that there are now effectively no areas of the earth which are untouched by human hands—whether that's that directly through physical contact or indirectly through our impact on the climate, on migration patterns, on biodiversity. Of course not all human impact is negative—there is a great deal of invaluable conservation work and creation care that goes on around the world. But it is telling, and perhaps ironic, that places of 'unspoiled beauty' make for extremely popular tourist destinations.

In her commentary on this passage from Romans, Alice Sinnott notes that the Bible affirms the importance of places of wilderness as a reminder to humans that we cannot control, or even understand, all aspects of nature. Perhaps part of that 'revealing' that Paul speaks of is a humility on the part of God's children in acknowledging the extent of our impact as a species. We can then seek to live in such a way that respects the wildness in the world without trying to tame it or destroy it.

*Notice the temptation within yourself to tame or bring order to wildness.
How will you resist that temptation today?*

WEEK FOUR, DAY TWO

*There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a
bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.*

Exodus 3:2

Moses had, by this point, lived and worked in the wilderness for decades. A burning bush would not have been anything out of the ordinary and yet he was attuned enough to his environment to recognise that there was something unusual going on here. It is in stopping and looking that he is able to encounter the living God.

Maximus the Confessor, who we have already met, saw the forty years in the wilderness as a kind of preparation for Moses for this one encounter. Moses' familiarity with his environment enabled him *'to see and hear...the divine fire that exists...within the essence of things'*. God is present in all of his creation, Maximus is saying, but we can only see that divine fire when we are ready to look.

The Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning made a similar point in her poem *Aurora Leigh*: *'Earth's crammed with heaven', she says, 'and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees takes off his shoes, the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.'*

This is far from being Pantheism, where everything is God, though it often faces that criticism. Rather it is Panentheism—where God may be found *in* everything without all things becoming God. This is a tension that Maximus and his contemporaries were perhaps able to hold more lightly than we are today. How often do we miss what God is doing because we are not ready, or willing to see it? If we can but open our eyes then we too may see God in the holy ground of all Creation.

*How will you open your eyes to the 'divine fire that exists
within the essence of things' today?*

WEEK FOUR, DAY ONE

After he had dismissed his disciples, Jesus went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.

Matthew 14:23

There is an old Hasidic story about a girl who each morning during the daily prayers would leave the Synagogue and go out into the woods. One day her grandfather decided to follow her and watched as his granddaughter prayed, surrounded by animals and trees. "Why do you go outside to pray?" He asked. "When I am in nature I feel closer to God" the girl replied. "Don't you know that God is the same everywhere?" her Grandfather responded. "I know" said the girl "but I'm not."

Jesus would frequently take himself off into the hills to pray. One reason for this was that it was away from the crowds in the towns and villages but I suspect that another reason was simply that he found it easier to pray up in the hills. This is a sentiment echoed by the nineteenth century Scottish writer and naturalist John Muir who said *'I'd rather be in the mountains thinking about God than in church thinking about the mountains.'*

There are lots of people who feel close to God in church, and churches are designed to aid that encounter. But for many people—most people, even—they feel closer to God when they are outside, walking the dog, or pottering in the garden, or climbing a mountain, or out on the bike.

So often people feel afraid to admit this, even to themselves, and so think that because they struggle to engage with God in a church building then perhaps they can't engage with God at all—this is not true. God is the same everywhere, but we are not.

*Do you have a particular place where you feel closer to God?
Try spending time praying outdoors today.*

WEEK TWO, DAY SIX

Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

1 Timothy 4:4-5

There are many different images which have been used to describe the relationship between humans and the rest of creation—stewards, masters, gardeners, rulers, simply creatures—but one which is gradually being rediscovered is the call of humanity to be priests of creation. This image, which comes particularly from the Orthodox Church, is often related back to passages such as Psalms 104 and 148 in which the whole of creation is seen to be offering up a cosmic hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God the creator and sustainer of all. The priestly role of humanity is then to join with our fellow creatures in giving voice to this wordless praise.

The Orthodox theologian Elizabeth Theokritoff writes that *'Nature can and does image God's glory by itself; but the offering of creation as a whole is incomplete unless humans turn their awareness of the world around them into their own offering of thanksgiving.'* This idea is picked up by Graham Tomlin in his book *'The Widening Circle'*. Drawing on this passage from 1 Timothy he says that *'Human thanksgiving and praise both echo and fulfil the priestly work of Christ, who offers himself to God on behalf of the rest of creation'*

Part of our calling as humans, made in the image of God, is to offer the life of the world back to God in our praise and thanksgiving. To use the language of another Orthodox theologian, John Zizioulas, as we pass creation through our hands as an offering, we receive it back as a blessing and are then able to work for its transformation.

*How will you turn your awareness of the world around you
into your own offering of thanksgiving today?*

WEEK TWO, DAY SEVEN

How good it is to sing praises to our God!

He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.

Psalm 147:1,4

The ancient Greeks reckoned that there were around 6,000 stars in the night sky—no mean feat counting them all—but of course we now know that there are many many more than that. In fact there is no way of truly knowing how many stars there are in the universe because even with the best telescopes we can only see a fraction of what is out there. You can just imagine the writer of Psalm 147 lying out on a clear evening just as we did last night, gazing up at the sheer magnitude of the night sky and writing those words of praise.

To know that God is able not only to count all the stars but also to name them tells us about the magnitude of our God. But Psalm 147 is not the only time the Psalmist reflects on the stars in the sky—Psalm 8 includes these words: *‘When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?’*

The God who created the stars and knows them by name also created each and every one of us, cares for us and knows us by name too. However much humans may have done to spoil it, we are part of God’s good creation. Much damage has been done in recent centuries by intellectually separating ourselves off from the rest of creation. We must make sure that in our efforts to redress that balance we remember that we are God’s beloved children, part of God’s beloved creation, in which every planet, every plant, and every person is known and named and loved.

Try and count the stars today.

What can they teach you about God’s great love for creation?

DAILY REFLECTIONS

WEEK FOUR:

CONTEMPLATION

WEEK THREE, DAY SEVEN

Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars.

Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths

Psalm 148:3,7

St Francis of Assisi, perhaps more than anyone else in the Christian tradition, is closely associated with care and reverence for creation. Even fierce critics of Christian environmental attitudes single out St Francis as an exceptional figure. Francis' best known work is his Cantic of the Creatures, written mostly during the winter of 1224-25 in his native Umbrian dialect, in which he calls for God to be praised through '*all your creatures, especially... Brother Sun... Sister Moon... Brother Wind... Sister Water... Brother Fire... and Sister Mother Earth.*'

The Cantic acknowledges the role of humans in praising God, but also recognises that the creatures themselves praise God through their very nature. For example, Francis writes '*Be praised, my Lord, through brother fire, through whom you light the night.*' Francis' contemplation of nature leads him to see creation as a network of familial relationships in which brother and sister, human and non-human share and praise the same Father God. The environmental ethicist Jame Schaeffer sees the significance of Francis' approach, concluding that following his example ought to lead to '*a posture of piety towards all creatures by loving them for themselves.*'

Acknowledging our connectedness with, and dependence on, our fellow creatures means that we cannot take a utilitarian approach to the natural world. These are not objects to be controlled but brothers and sisters, calling us to join our voices in the great cosmic symphony of praise.

Are there particular brother or sister creatures that inspire you to praise?

Try writing your own 'Cantic of the Creatures' today

DAILY REFLECTIONS

WEEK THREE:

PRAISE

WEEK THREE, DAY ONE

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

Psalm 19:1

It was dark when we arrived in the churchyard so our first priority was lighting the firepit. As the fire began to strengthen the people began to gather, coats and hats at the ready, eyes turned anxiously towards the sky in the hope that the promised rain would hold off. This had seemed like a good idea when I'd suggested it many weeks before. Now I wasn't so confident.

We began with a song and as the sky began to brighten so did the little congregation. It looked like the clouds were playing their part after all. Next came the sign of the cross. We had started Lent all those weeks ago with a cross of ash for repentance, today that would be replaced with a cross of oil for joy. *'God calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light'* we said.

As we continued the first hints of colour stretched their fingers out across the Eastern sky. Standing at the makeshift communion table I read that oh so familiar story, the story of another morning in another graveyard.

As I spoke I could see light, and wonder, creeping slowly across the faces before me. I folded up my suddenly inadequate sermon notes, and instead turned to stand alongside the others. For ten glorious minutes we watched in silence, spellbound, as the sun slowly crept over the horizon, preaching a far more profound and memorable sermon about the resurrection than I ever could.

*They have no speech, they use no words;
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth.
Their words to the ends of the world*

*Take time to listen to the sermons being preached around you today.
What are they telling you about God? The world? Yourself?*

WEEK THREE, DAY SIX

*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?
Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care*

Matthew 10:29

We had a young baby at the time so I was used to getting up early in the morning, but on this particular day I was up early for a different reason. We were coming to the end of a week of lectures about Christianity and the environment where we had studied all sorts of theologians and traditions, and had engaged in some wholehearted debates around these issues. On the final morning, for something a bit different, our tutors invited us to join them in the woods behind the college at 4am to hear the dawn chorus.

As we gathered, bleary eyed in the gloom, we stood in silence. For about twenty minutes there was nothing to be heard and we began to wonder whether it had been worth getting out of a nice warm bed for this. Then the first bird, a robin, began to warm up. Before long others had plucked up the confidence to join in and as they did our tutors expertly identified them—thrushes, finches, warblers and more.

As the day grew lighter the song grew louder and at some point our little gathering turned from a study group exercise into a profoundly moving time of prayer, led by the countless creatures into whose woods we had stumbled. Most of these birds we probably wouldn't give a second thought to if they flew past us in the daylight yet this encounter was a reminder that they are loved and cared for by their creator and they respond to that love and care by pouring out their souls and their songs in the early light of dawn.

As Mary Oliver says in her poem *I Happened To Be Standing*: *'I thought, of the wren's singing, what could this be if it isn't a prayer? So I just listened'*

*Spend time 'just listening' today.
How will your fellow creatures lead you in prayer?*

WEEK THREE, DAY FIVE

Then God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.'

Genesis 1:24

Gerard Manley Hopkins was a Jesuit priest and poet, born in 1844 and even as a child showed a flair for the creative and an affinity towards nature. Many of his poems, explicitly or implicitly, explore the relationship between God and nature, and in particular what Hopkins called *'inscape'* which is that which gives something its unique identity—what makes a tree an elm rather than an oak or a poplar? He is very clear that this individuality is given by God.

Hopkins' view of the natural world can be summed up in the opening line from one of his most well known poems, God's Grandeur:

'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.'

Hopkins sees God's glory flowing through the whole of creation and he goes on to see it sparkling *'like shining from shook foil'* throughout the world. In another sonnet, The Starlight Night, he uses fourteen exclamation marks as he exhorts the reader to *'Look at the stars! Look, look up at the skies!'* in praise of the creator God.

This excitable response is balanced in the poem, God's Grandeur, by another more gentle image of God's glory being like *'the ooze of oil / Crushed'*, giving a sense of God enriching the world and filling it with flavour. This contrast between dynamism and gentleness, the spectacular and the mundane, is beautifully put in his poem, Pied Beauty, in which he calls upon

'All things... swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim; ... Praise him.'

*Try and notice those contrasts today.
How is God praised by their differences?*

WEEK THREE, DAY TWO

'I tell you,' Jesus replied, 'if my disciples keep quiet, the stones will cry out.'

Luke 19:40

Among many fascinating stories in his book *'Soil and Soul'*, the Scottish ecologist and Quaker Alastair McIntosh tells the tale of the fight to save mount Roineabhal on the Hebridean island of Harris from being turned into one of the largest quarries in Europe. He was working for the Centre for Human Ecology, then part of the University of Edinburgh, and became one of the figureheads of the campaign to save the mountain. In the book he tells of how, as he began to actually walk the mountain and meet the people living around it, he realised that this was far more than simply an economic or political fight, this was a spiritual battle.

'What is a mountain actually for?', McIntosh writes, *'Is the value of Roineabhal just a few pounds per ton for road stone? Is [it] just a collector's item? Or do these things have an intrinsic value? A value that perhaps testifies, ultimately, to the glory of God?'* In recognising this the campaign became a fight to respond, not just to the needs of the people who live and work on the mountain, but the cries for justice from the stones themselves.

This perhaps finds justification in Jesus' assertion that if his disciples do not praise him, *'the stones will cry out'*. Even if people remain silent, the praise of creation continues. However that praise can so often be drowned out by human greed, neglect, or abuse and so part of the call of all humanity to care for creation is the task of ensuring that creation is able to praise God, rather than—to use St Paul's language—groaning under the weight of human sin.

*What small actions can you take to ensure that the
praise of creation continues around you today?*

WEEK THREE, DAY THREE

*Sing for joy you heavens, shout aloud you earth beneath.
Burst into song you mountains, you forests and all your trees*

Isaiah 44:23

When I was a teenager we went to the Dolomite mountains in Italy on holiday. On one particular day we went for a long walk and, after passing through the forests on the lower slopes, we broke through the treeline to discover a field of boulders. Being an adventurous teenager I quickly looked around to try and spot the biggest boulder which I then proceeded to climb. As I reached the top my breath was taken away by the spectacular view over the forest to the valley pasture below and I was immediately reminded of these wonderful words from the hymn, 'How Great Thou Art':

*When through the woods and forest glades I wander
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees,
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze,
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee,
How great Thou art!*

I have sung that hymn countless times since then and each and every time I am reminded of that scene and the praise it inspired. Graham Usher, now Bishop of Dudley, writes about the spiritual significance of mountains in his book 'Places of Enchantment'. He concludes that *'by going up the mountain, literally and metaphorically, we can leave something of the world behind...and become open to the invitation of God.'* *If we reach the summit, in that vastness that lies before us, so God is also present'*

*Do you have particular memories of places associated with songs or hymns?
Allow the places you go today to inspire your praise of God*

WEEK THREE, DAY FOUR

*"The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."*

Isaiah 55:12 (NRSV)

He sits there on the edge, skin gnarled and worn, wrapped in a wrinkled overcoat - a size too big - to keep the wind at bay. His gaze takes in the water as the passers by pass by. They come and go, he does not mourn for those no longer seen by knotted eyes. He used to set the Autumn sky ablaze but he cannot remember how, or why.

A crow has the temerity to land. I watch him as he deftly shrugs it off, displaying his contempt with an irate harrumph as the wind picks up, blowing in a further feathered throng, filling the landscape like a fall of soot and snow. They scoff, cackle and caw, their chorus swells, abates as his reluctant shade stifles their din.

He stands there quivering, rooted to the spot. After all these years, unnumbered days of keeping watch amidst the wild and bleak, he knows his place in the Grand Scheme of Things. He is content now, youth's longings forgotten, no more need for flamboyant displays just quiet pride. Leaves rustle, branches creak as every fibre of his being sings
his maker's praise.

Rich Clarkson, 2017

*Pay attention to the life around you today,
how are your fellow creatures singing their maker's praise?*